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An Interview with Andreas Eshete

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AN INTERVIEW WITH ANDREAS ESHETE*

by Dagmarwi Woubshet

WOUBSHET: Andreas, thank you for this opportunity to dialogue with you; it's a pleasure and a privilege. Perhaps we could start discussing your writing as a philosopher; then, transition to talk about your work as a public intellectual, the ways in which you have connected philosophy to political practice; and end with your thoughts on Ethiopian culture.

You have written that the general perception of philosophy as "an incubation inquiry" is misguided. What do you mean by that and also what kind of metaphor do you think aptly characterizes philosophical inquiry?

ESHETE: I think the incubation idea comes from the history of philosophy. Philosophy used to be kind of an all-encompassing discipline and so for example most of the famous treatises in natural science were called treatises in natural philosophy. So many of the great English scientists—Newton, Bacon, and so on—were natural philosophers. So, usually the idea was that a subject would reach a certain level of maturity in philosophy and then it would become an independent science. Of course, there is still this phenomena going on, perhaps most significantly and most recently, in Cognitive Sciences. For a long time nobody studied the mind except people in psychology, who were very much behavioristically inclined—famously, of course, Skinner and many others. But when people realized that we don't know very much about the mind, and we still don't, particularly the most interesting aspects of our mental life—for example, consciousness, or what it is like to experience yellow or experience pain, about which we still have no clear idea—that search took the form of an incubation inquiry or science. To come back to your question, with all the progress made in natural science, if we were to take a measure of our scientific knowledge, we still have to ask philosophical questions. The same is true with the mind. If we want to know, for example, developments in the cognitive sciences, we have to attend to philosophical questions. Even people who are practitioners—clinical practitioners who deal with mental life and illness—end up, at least the best ones, asking philosophical questions. So, my thought is philosophy's work is never done. And the fact that it has all these progeny in the sciences, not just in the natural sciences but also the social science, doesn't mean that philosophy is supplanted by other more rigorous sciences.

* This interview was conducted on July 9, 2009, at the president's office in Ras Mekonnen Hall, Addis Ababa University.

WOUBSHET: It's interesting that you position philosophy within the sciences. But, at the same time, you have written that "what makes philosophy as a field of inquiry very special is that no area of intellectual activity is alien to philosophy," which reminds me of Terence's observation—"I am a human being, I consider nothing that is human alien to me." This characterization of philosophy speaks to the endeavor of literature. Can you say more about the ways in which philosophy, on the one hand, is situated in the sciences and, on the other, is within the domain of the humanities. It seems philosophy is unique in straddling these two realms.

ESHETE: Its kinship to literature is probably the most important in my mind—why? Because first like literature philosophy addresses in one way highly deep and difficult questions, and in another way questions that everyone asks, like what is it to be moral, what is it to do the right thing, and so on. These are not just technical question, but questions that everybody asks. What is beautiful is a concern of everyone. So in a way literature and philosophy share that concern. And it's very important that inquiry be rooted in questions that exercise common sense. So, that is one area of kinship. Secondly, I believe literature is endlessly many things but, at least for me, one of the morally important things literature does is explore more imaginative possibilities, and I mean that in a very broad sense. Writers that I admire, for example my favorite short story writer is V. S. Pritchett and what I admire most about his writing, skills apart, is that he focuses on perfectly ordinary people. He shows the intricacy of the lives of perfectly ordinary English people, like shopkeepers and old people who are monuments of a neighborhood. Everyone gives lip service to the idea that each human life is valuable and equally valuable as any other life. But usually we have a hard time capturing this. This important thought is conveyed and exemplified in literature, and philosophy aspires to do the same. The other point about imaginative possibilities is that we all become victims of circumstances, of habits, of practices, which are of course enabling since we can't do without them, but at the same time we are prisoners of them; they are in one way or another restrictive. And what literature does and does very importantly is show the imaginative possibilities of going beyond these. Literature shows us new ways of living and new ways of experiencing life. And this is true I think not just in novels but across the board, with poetry, with short stories, even with narrative history. And, in a way, philosophy does this. For example, one of the great traditions in philosophy is skepticism. And the force of skepticism is to make us question what we take completely for granted. So this is an important point of kinship between the two endeavors.

WOUBSHET: Which leads me to ask: what led you to study philosophy, considering your affinity to possibilities that also guide literature?

ESHETE: You know, I went to school a very long time ago, so when I went to school, people especially from countries like Ethiopia, people from poor places, studied economics, medicine, something useful you know. I remember once a policeman stopped me in Vermont. I was going to school at Williams and Vermont is just across the border and I spent some time nearby at Bennington. And so he stopped me and he was kind of nasty, he

probably hadn't come across too many black people. This is a very rural part of Vermont, you know, and I explained that I was a student and that I was going to Bennington and it is possible I was speeding up and I am sorry and so on. He asks what are you studying at Williams and I said philosophy; where are you from he said, I said Ethiopia. What do you need philosophy for? And that I think is a very common reaction. I remember a lot of people, including Ethiopians, would ask me the same question. One reason was at that time the social sciences were really dismal. If you looked at any of them at the time, and I started reading the social sciences to start with, I couldn't take it, so I stopped. The only course I remember I enjoyed my first year was a course in poetry—and then you were required to do many things, this was a college which took pride in the liberal arts. That was really good, but that apart, the only subject that spoke to my interests, and not in a falsely disciplinary or academic way, was philosophy.

WOUBSHET: You did your undergraduate studies at Williams and continued to study philosophy as a graduate student at Yale. Could you just give us a sense of what the currents in philosophy were when you were in graduate school? And also what led you to pursue political philosophy in particular?

ESHETE: This was the time when analytic philosophy was really on the rise, very prestigious, and analytical philosophy at the time meant really linguistic philosophy. Under the enormous influence of Wittgenstein everyone was convinced that the way to make headway in philosophy was to study language, language in a very narrow way. If you were drawn to Austin you studied words and phrases, and if drawn to Wittgenstein then studied language in a broader way. This was the orthodoxy, which meant substantive philosophy, philosophy about questions of substance, was completely marginalized. And most marginalized was practical philosophy. Ethics virtually was non-existent. Political philosophy was dead. In fact if anything was written on political philosophy it was about the death of this subject. And happily for me, there was one famous exception, H. L. A. Hart. Hart had just come out with his book, *The Concept of Law*. A good thing, and the lucky thing about Hart was that he was a student of Wittgenstein's and Austin's. Yet, for the first time here was a person who addressed a substantive subject, law. And somebody assigned this as the book for the senior exam for honors students, and I read Hart and I was completely taken up by him. And I ended up actually at Yale writing a good part of my dissertation on Hart. And Hart is still in my mind one of the most important practical philosophers, not just in the philosophy of law; for example, his influence on Jack Rawls is enormous. Then of course Rawls came along. So the two of them, more or less single handedly, were responsible with a few others—Bernard Williams is another—for making philosophy speak to the questions we were talking about before, you know, questions that pertained to everyday people and everyday institutions. So since I was very hungry for this form of inquiry, given the aridity of this area for years, I was eager to pursue it. And it wasn't the case by the way that in New Haven anybody worked very much on these things. So more or less I did it on my own. And I could do this because Yale was in a way a bit resistant to analytic philosophy. So there was some talk at Yale of Heidegger and the other continental luminaries of twentieth century philosophy.

WOUBSHET: You have made incisive arguments on behalf of fraternity: fraternity as a public ideal, a virtue that enables and strengthens civic life. In your essay, "On Fraternity," I was taken by two overlapping points: on the one hand, the manner in which you demystify our perception of fraternity as a domestic form of relation, and, on the other, the way you nevertheless intimate the kind of affective and intimate impulses of fraternity to think through questions of the public sphere. Can you say more about these overlapping claims?

ESHETE: On the first question, on taking it out of the household and so on, I think here, there are many virtues like fraternity that we think of as domestic that people, say in the ancient world, did not think of as domestic. Friendship for the Greeks was a relationship between equals and a perfectionist relationship, a relationship that has to do with shared values, so it was much more of a public virtue. Of course, the household, given its ancient make up with slaves was not thought of as a domain for cultivating virtue, seen very plainly in Aristotle and dramatically in Plato. So virtue was supposed to be displayed in the city. Of course the city was a smaller affair but still it was a public space. And it is not true, if you think of patriotism, if you think of all sorts of things for which people die and things that shape their lives, that they are domestic virtues, even in the modern world. Machiavelli is another person who thought of this virtue in a very public way. The other thing is that it has to do with the modern world. I was saying before for example friendship for the Greeks was restricted to first of all citizens, there is no idealization of friendship with slaves or among slaves or with women. But a virtue of modern life is that we have something like character friendship, which means that in principle the domain of friendship now is much, much bigger. One can be friends with anyone. The same with fraternity, we can have a sense of solidarity with very distant people, around shared ideals and so on. So there is a certain freedom that the classical world lacks and the modern world has.

WOUBSHET: Elaine Scarry, in her wonderful book *On Beauty and Being Just*, points out that you are one of the few philosophers who has given fraternity its due as one of the virtues that underwrites liberal theories of justice. Why is it in your estimation that out of the revolutionary triad (liberty, equality, and fraternity), fraternity is neglected while so much philosophical attention is given to liberty and equality?

ESHETE: Some of it is historical. For example, when the Americans championed liberty and equality they had slavery. So they couldn't with ease include fraternity as a major public value unless that too is restricted. And also admitting the importance of fraternity would have dramatized the fact that liberty and equality were restricted to whites, basically propertied white males. In other traditions, there are other historical reasons. The failure of the commune in France, for example, has a great deal to do with the fact that fraternity was not sustained as a public value in the way that liberty and equality were, even in France. France of course more than other Western nations pays attention to fraternity. The other thing is, this is also a historical reason, one of the ways in which there has been moral progress in the world is that the scope of liberty, the reach of liberty and equality, has widened within and across societies. And what explains this for me, morally, not causally but morally what explains this is the power of fraternity. It's when

we recognize that blacks have souls, women have souls, children have souls, maybe animals have souls, that we extend the other political ideals to people who were heretofore excluded from them. But, we want to forget this, we want to forget the fact that this was restricted. Nobody admits that within memory many societies—modern societies who pride themselves with modernity—were slaveholding societies. We in Ethiopia, too, it's part of our self-image that slavery is forgotten; part of this forgetting involves forgetting fraternity's power as well. Because we want to say that all along we were in the same human family, which is false. So that is another reason why fraternity was downplayed. The third reason is solidarity / fraternity at least in the twentieth century, in part after the French Revolution but definitely after the Russian Revolution, becomes associated with radical socialist politics. So working class solidarity is a very familiar idea, even solidarity within the labor movement is a familiar idea, so hostility to radical politics, to socialism spills over to solidarity / fraternity as an ideal.

WOUBSHET: If I can just remain with Scarry's book to ask one more question. She argues that "the creative undertaking on behalf of beauty and on behalf of justice are aligned." And she underlines this specific subject when she gestures to your work, although you are a philosopher who has given considerable attention to other virtues like fraternity and integrity, do you see beauty as a form of virtue? And furthermore do you see the relationship that Scarry makes between beauty and justice?

ESHETE: I think the connection she makes, to my mind, is too strong. I have always urged this on Elaine, but which she has resisted probably for excellent reasons. But I do think that there are a lot of connections. This is not of course a new idea. Kant very famously thought of beauty as a symbol for morality. There is this very great, famous line of his essay on the "Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals," where he starts to talk about the two things that are he says beyond praise: "the starry skies above and the moral law within." What do these things have in common besides the sublime? It is beauty, I think. And the fact that we look up to them in that way. I mean the starry skies are in one way or another admired by everyone and not least for their beauty. Morality has the same kind of feature. The kinship is clear; the Iris Murdoch kinship between beauty and morality which Scarry discusses is I think still forceful. Iris Murdoch, as you remember, her view is that it's in beauty that people forget themselves, become disinterested. Kant makes the same point, but she makes it very forcefully. She says, even the most selfish person, when he looks at a flower, a bird, and so on, he stops thinking about himself. So if what motivates us to morality is not to care for everyone, which is very ambitious or in the Christian way by loving everyone, loving someone, caring for something may be enough and in that respect being absorbed by a flower, a bird, and so on might be an underrated step into moral motivation. So that is one connection.

Another connection, the one that connects to the point about fraternity, is that morality for a long time, at least in the Anglo-American tradition, is thought as a matter of results—making the world better, worrying about how the world as a whole goes—or as a matter of principles. Between Kant and utilitarians, these are the two ruling views about what morality is. But both I think have been thought in one way or another to fall short because we don't simply say that a person is moral if he makes the world better or improves how

the world goes in any way whatsoever. In result, we don't believe just in principles as Kant. We believe in the importance of motivation, but, not only that, the motivation has to be of a certain kind. So if I do good for my friend and if I please my friend the motivation has to be just that. Anything else would be an extra or a mistaken motivation. So, I say all this to say why the virtues are important because they insist on the emotional background of our actions and how that colors the moral value of conduct. Bringing back this to the case of beauty and morality, beauty is clearly something that has to engage our feelings. If what I said about the virtue approach to morality insists that our feelings have to be engaged and rightly engaged for us to be moral and our conduct to be moral—that I think is a very strong link between morality and beauty, not direct but strong.

WOUBSHET: Let me shift gears and turn to a different set of questions. Before asking you particular questions regarding how you've connected philosophical inquiry and political practice, I wonder if you have general thoughts about the role of the intellectual or the public intellectual.

ESHETE: I think there are two people who are critical in our conception of what a public intellectual is, historically. One is Socrates, clearly, if there were a public intellectual in the ancient world, it has to be him. I mean, he saw it as his task to take everyone to task, to question everything that is accepted as a duty, imposed in this case by the gods. The modern figure with as big a role in many ways, and whose influence is across all political traditions, is Gramsci. In Gramsci's case, of course, it's a kind of an anti-Leninist picture of the role of knowledge, the role of intellectuals, and the role of leadership in public life. His idea is basically to bring change. The most important step is to have a change in public conception, and to persuade people of the merit of public conception, and to make the public conception realized psychologically, institutionally, and so on. That is what public intellectuals are supposed to do and I agree with this and I agree with the Socratic one as well, fighting complacency and moral complacency in the Socratic sense. It may sound dogmatic, but I believe in the slogan "the unexamined life is not worth living." And part of the role of the public intellectual is to make sure that your fellow citizens, your community does not stop examining itself, that we are not complacent.

WOUBSHET: The artist, Baldwin says, and I think we can extend it to apply to the intellectual, "ought to be the disturber of the peace."

ESHETE: The gadfly idea of Socrates is the same, the public intellectual as a nuisance. That is as good a definition of the public intellectual as anything.

WOUBSHET: I am part of a generation of Ethiopians commonly referred to as "*Ye Derg Lij*"—"The Derg's Child." We were not born during Emperor Haile Selassie's reign nor were we old enough to recall the revolution or remember the turmoil and agitation that marked Ethiopia in the late 60s and 70s. If you were to characterize that decisive, epochal transition in Ethiopian life for a generation that didn't live through it, what would you say?

ESHETE: The things that people of your generation I imagine would have a hard time having an internal sense of are things like the throne, the importance of the crown, the importance of absolutism. Absolutism for people in the West is a very distant idea. When I grew up it was an everyday phenomena. The legitimacy of the throne / crown was unquestioned by everyone, not just peasants, not just ordinary people, but by the educated, by the elite, by all members of the ruling class. So demystifying the crown and the legitimacy of absolute rule was a big deal. And a lot went with this, for example the status of the church. Having a church which was an established church and which, at most, tolerated other faiths was an absurd situation but that was the situation in which we grew up. I didn't think actually that the crown, the monarchy, would go and the privilege of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church would go within my lifetime. I didn't even think that it would be put seriously into question. But both things happened and in a very brief span of time. And it is an enormous achievement that people still do not realize.

There are many other things related with this of course because the social order that went with this involved the subordination of peasants in ways that were horrifying; the subordination of minority people or people who had come to the empire later through conquest, especially in the South, in the East, and in the border areas. The freedom from second-class citizenship—from which suffered both the peasants and the ethnic groups that were conquered and assimilated with the empire—is an incredible thing. For me it was demeaning to live in a society where we had peasants who were tenants for generation after generation, to have ethnic groups who didn't feel that this was their home, who did not have any kind of Ethiopian identity except by pretending—pretending means changing their names, changing their faiths. So that is the past we got rid of, it doesn't seem much now but it is a huge achievement—a huge achievement particularly for a poor society. If you had an industrial revolution and so on many of these things would of course as a matter of course disappear, not always but generally. Here we had nothing. All we had was agitators and we still got rid of this incredibly heavy past. And this wasn't really like getting rid of privilege in societies like the United States. Ethiopia is a very old country; these things had been around for centuries. So getting rid of them largely through the agitation of a student movement where the number of educated people was a handful and all of this in fifteen years is an amazing thing, miraculous in my mind.

WOUBSHET: It is incredible indeed to think that it was students, young people, who shouldered that kind of responsibility and transformed Ethiopia.

ESHETE: There are many important things in play in the creation of this generation of students and the kind of unwavering commitment they had, some national, some international. Nationally, perhaps the most important to my mind was the National Service which took students to the countryside from the university. And through it for the first time Ethiopian students realized that they were incredibly privileged and their privilege was being supported by people who lived in abject poverty and misery. That changed people radically. Radically in the sense that they realized their privilege; they realized who was supporting them and what conditions they lived in; thirdly, they realized that they had no champions. This was one major, major breakthrough I think. Because after National

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Service there was no student protest over issues having to do with students, everything had to do with peasants and with religious and national minorities.

A different source of inspiration was the civil rights movement—that was a huge inspiration to Ethiopians. I can't tell you how much it mattered to Ethiopians because in a way their situation was analogous to what I was describing as ours. Like the Ethiopian students, African Americans were a small minority, and without any really serious resources—they didn't have votes that counted, they didn't have economic power. It took quite a while after the civil rights movement was rolling that boycotts meant something. It wasn't a given the bus boycotts in Montgomery could work. Although they had no economic power to talk about or political power, still they mounted this enormous movement which shook the country and shook it to the roots and it worked. It's not the same country anymore. And then of course there are movements that were offsprings of the civil rights movement—the anti-war movement, the women's movement, the gay movement, all these which make the United States an attractive society by comparison for example to many other western societies. They had to be credited to the moral and enormous physical courage of African Americans and we were very much influenced by this, and people in my generation were not just participants—we took part in the movement and we learnt a lot from them. In New Haven, for example, where I was a student at that time, the Black Panthers headquarters was there, so we had everyday contact with them, we took part in the marches and the various programs like the voter registration programs. And we learned a lot from them on how to organize and in light of what I was saying were the extreme scarcity in terms of resources of the movement, we learned about the power of ideas in changing things.

WOUBSHET: How did you get involved?

ESHETE: Well, SNCC was established around this time, and I was still at Williams, and SNCC worked in the South, the student movement of course started out that way and then they decided that they wanted to have a Northern counterpart called NSM—the Northern Student Movement, I joined that. I worked on voter registration, not very much but enough to know what it was like in the South. Then in sort of everyday activities of tutoring kids in the ghetto, I did that. I had many friends who took time off from school to do these things. A very good friend from Williams and Yale, who later became an academic lawyer, took a year off to mobilize people in Chicago's ghettos. So there were many of us who did community work connected to civil rights.

WOUBSHET: When you began identifying with African Americans did that also entail developing a racial consciousness, since in Ethiopia other forms of identity, like ethnicity and nationality, figure so prominently?

ESHETE: But even here, when I was talking about national oppression in Ethiopia earlier, a major dimension of ethnic oppression in Ethiopia was racial. People don't acknowledge it but it is true. In Menilik High School, where I was a student, there were boarding students and most of them came from the South, Gambella, Borena, and also Somalia. And the kids from Gambella, Borena, and so on were clearly discriminated against. I remember I had

very close friends from Gambella and Borena, and during school holidays I would take them home. People were quite surprised that I did this. We would go to watering holes in town where all students go, and you would be starred down. My friend Gabriel, for example, was from Gambella was very, very tall. I came up to his belt exactly so when we were at a bar everybody was treating us as if we were part of a circus group or something. So there were racial attitudes here, yet racism in the States was overwhelming. I went on this ASPA scholarship, one of the people, we were seven of us, who went that year, all of them university students except me, one of them was a third or fourth year student at the engineering college here in Addis. He was in Minnesota, I remember, and he went to a bar to have a beer and they started insulting him, racial insults. He went to his dorm, got a gun, and shot at them. I spent a lot of time so they would deport him instead of jail him for life. So it hit close to home when it happened. When we went to work on voter registration in Atlanta, drinking fountains were separate, bathrooms were separate, there were many restaurants where we stopped we couldn't eat. So this is vivid. And, you know this was the time when many people were writing—African American writers like Baldwin and many others—and to me and many of my friends this was mesmerizing, not just the writers, but also activists like Angela Davis were mesmerizing.

WOUBSHET: What were Americans' estimations of you and your fellow Ethiopians? It seems you went there and identified with African Americans and found a real resource from which to draw on to address the conditions in Ethiopia. So, I am curious to hear how Americans received you.

ESHETE: The reactions were wild sometimes. I remember my first day tutoring in Harlem. I had lots of hair, a big, big afro, and I tutored in the middle of Harlem in this building where the elevator never worked, so you walked up six flights and so on. I remember when I came out from the tutorial, and walked to the subway, kids followed me because they had never seen hair like this.

WOUBSHET: This was before the afro became symbolic, right?

ESHETE: Everybody had straightened hair except little kids, and they had very short hair. They had never seen so much hair so they would ask if they could touch it. There was this kind of reaction and this was part of it. And of course they were taught crazy ideas about how Africa was like so that was a barrier. But within the movement we were really accepted. When I worked for example with the Panthers in New Haven, they were worried more that they would throw me out of America, so I often did office work and usually in the evening. But in the office itself I was just another person who worked there and there was no distance of any kind. And many of them who knew about the emperor looked up to Ethiopia, because of Ethiopia's prestige from the war and from the Back-To-Africa movements. So the fact that we were opposed to the emperor, we were opposed to the imperial order, to some people was jarring because they considered him as a hero and so on. But they came around.

WOUBSHET: We have been talking about the 1960s and 1970s and the kind of activism and political ferment that characterized those decades. What's your take on the 1980s? You taught in different US universities—Berkeley, Brown, and the University of Pennsylvania—during the 1980s, and I wonder what that experience was like?

ESHETE: It was an incredible time. In many places one could say there was a “post-revolutionary blues.” If you were at Berkeley, it was hard to imagine that this was the setting for the free speech movement, you know. The right wing types on campus like the faculty and so on were emboldened by people like Reagan and so were outspoken. So it was very depressing. And, there was a sense of sort of being lost and some people thinking that the 1960s and 1970s were a mistake.

WOUBSHET: How about the effects of these political movements in the academy, for example, in terms of establishing disciplines like African American studies and women's studies, and in 1980s the backlash and the culture wars that ensued?

ESHETE: Yes this was happening, it's true. These were actually the more benign consequences. Though for someone like me at that time it looked much more like a matter of domestication. Now, we are becoming part of the official agenda, so even though the people were doing it and were completely in earnest and many emerged from this—women's studies and certainly African American studies. But there is this transition in many places, but a transition that is jarring and glaring particularly in America, from popular movement to organized staff and then from organized staff to normalcy. So the kind of thing the ACLU does, what the NAACP does, became normal, and then came lobbies and so on. So the things they did were completely institutionalized, but the institutionalization was also of taming and normalization. You know you are internalizing these things and you are also subduing them and this was quite visible. Of course there were people who fought this within the academy. But there were major things that happened, major academic achievements such as the ones you mentioned, plus cultural phenomena, the rise in an enormous way of Black culture, it's a huge achievement. There were all these geniuses that nobody had noticed before and cultural phenomena like that were important to me. Black literature—and I don't mean just American Black—but think of an Indian novel, for example, and Indian cinema. Who would have imagined that contenders in England for the major literary prizes would be more Commonwealth than British? That's a huge achievement and a lasting one, I think. English literature now will be a Commonwealth business from now on. The British will be regional writers within Commonwealth literature; like Scottish poetry, British Domestic Fiction, British Novel of Manners, and so on, and there will be forms of Indian, Pakistani, Caribbean, and African writing. That is another achievement.

WOUBSHET: When you returned to Ethiopia after the Derg junta fell in the early 1990s, you became involved in shaping Ethiopia's first democratic constitution. What was that powerful undertaking like?

ESHETE: I really don't think I played that big a role. I was actually helping out people like *Gashe* Kifle, the framers of this constitution. It was an honor to do it, but it was a small role. But for me the moment was very important because I never thought we would have a second chance. Because everything we had tried was destroyed by these crazy soldiers and it wasn't clear that there will be another chance, especially given the bloodletting, and I didn't think people would have the strength to start afresh. So the constitution was important for me in that respect. Here is another opportunity for another start and a clean start so I thought we should give everything we have to it. So the thing I tried to do in connection with the constitution was to really make the powers that be like the political groups and the leaders, but also regular citizens aware of and engaged with the range of constitutional choices available to Ethiopia, given that we had this clean start. So I called on my friends, people from everywhere that I had worked with politically or in schools to come to Ethiopia. And the response was wonderful. Many, many people came. Of the people we talked about Elaine came, my friend Josh Cohen came, and many others joined us and we had incredible debates. To me it's still among the most memorable public debates that took place in Ethiopia and the combinations were great. Elaine, for example, spoke on what a people's army looks like and so did her Ethiopian counterpart, Tsadqan, who was chief of staff of the TPLF army and later the army. So this was a great exchange and of course their views dovetailed because you know he came from a people's war and a people's army that was his conception; she had a slightly different idea: the American militia idea / popular militia idea. But it was very interesting, coming from two very different traditions—Tsadqan is from a leftist tradition and hers was from the American tradition. But still they themselves were in the process of trying to figure out how to make the shift from a leftist ideology, army and so on, to a democratic one. So it worked out really well and it happened in many areas. It was really a wonderful thing.

WOUBSHET: You've argued that federalism is the most viable option for governing and holding together Ethiopia. Philosophically and historically, why is federalism the better constitutional option for Ethiopia and Ethiopians?

ESHETE: I think there are both reasons of history and reasons of theory if you like—practical theory—why this is important. The reasons of history are of course the fact that there were millions of Ethiopians who were completely marginalized, who didn't feel they were Ethiopians or who felt they could not be Ethiopians unless they gave up their own identity, hid it, or withheld it. So federalism of course got rid of this necessity. It also made all religions, all cultural communities in Ethiopia, equal and sovereign. So Ethiopia now is going to be a free union of these sovereign peoples who now could retain their identity while becoming full-fledged Ethiopians and in fact the makers and sovereign architects of the new Ethiopia. This is a very important thing. There are other features too. We are venturing on a democratic transition; we are still, I think, in that period. And democratic transition, especially in a country where autocracy had been the order of the day in a variety of ways for centuries, is not a very easy thing to do. Poverty doesn't help. The size of the country, its shape, the size of its population, the level of literacy and education in the society—all these things make it difficult, stand in the way of democratic

citizenship. Under these disabling burdens federalism afforded an avenue for democratic constraints on government or potential government abuse of power. Because one function of federalism, I think an important one, is to limit central power. There are certain things government cannot do without the consent of the regions. And if it tried by force, and if it went too far, they always have the option to exit. That is a major check. We never had such a strong check on abuse of political power, central political power, which is a long and sad, painful tradition of Ethiopian history. That is another reason why federalism is important. The other reason, a more positive one, is the flowering of diversity in Ethiopia. For the first time people are beginning to recognize our enormous culture and its range, and see a kind of cultural diversity, cultural experimentation which was impossible only a few decades ago.

WOUBSHET: The advantages of federalism are clear in protecting the entitlements and rights of groups, their rights to self-determination including secession, especially in a country like Ethiopia where so many nationals were disparaged and disenfranchised because of their ethnicity. As I understand federalism in Ethiopia, however, even though there is a clear recognition of the rights of the individual, it seems the way the individual enters the nation is only through his or her group identity. And, I find something seriously limiting about that.

ESHETE: There is that problem and I think it is not unique to Ethiopia, of course. And it is not just individuals and their rights that are a bit overshadowed by communal or cultural group rights. I think the same is true for women, for example, and other groups. Women's rights, for example, are overshadowed by ethnic rights. In some cases religious communities are overshadowed by ethnic communities. So it's not just individual rights. And in some cases if the cultural community is traditionally oppressive towards women this is disastrous, or if they have oppressive views about other groups, for example occupational groups. So, it's not just individual rights but group rights of others are also overshadowed by federalism and this is something that needs work.

WOUBSHET: I am struck by a concern you've raised about the hurdles democracy faces in Ethiopia. You write: "One serious obstacle is the country cannot draw on a democratic tradition. A constitution which aims to realize the ideals of government must reckon the long-standing status of citizens as powerless and voiceless subjects of governmental action." This point resonated for me because, having lived in the United States for twenty years, I have come to regard democracy not simply in political, legal, or institutional terms, but also in personal terms, as a sensibility, a temperament. It's a point that American writers as varied as Whitman and Ellison make. So, how do we begin in Ethiopia to tap into democracy's personal and cultural dimensions?

ESHETE: This goes back to the first thing we talked about, namely fraternity. The importance of fraternity is in part this, because it brings in this dimension. For even federalism to work, to work as it is supposed to, we need a sense of solidarity. It's not enough, for example in allocation of the national budget, that historically disadvantaged regions

get more. It's important that people believe they should get more. The point is this: that abolishing racial discriminations in the United States by law and successfully, which still hasn't been done, but fully successfully wouldn't make the United States a just society so long as people are racist. That has to go; that is where this dimension comes in, and from both sides. There is, for example, now a lot of cultural autonomy granted as we are saying to cultural communities but largely now that is linguistic autonomy; for example, the news is read in several languages. But we don't have Guraghe novels, Oromo plays, Hadiya poetry, and so on. If we had this kind of cultural flowering then perhaps there would be a sense of the value of the cultural pluralism and that would certainly translate to political pluralism because people would say look at this important group, look at what they are writing, look at what they are showing us that we didn't know. But it is still too early for this.

WOUBSHET: I wonder, as someone steeped in Western thought, particularly Western philosophy, what are the Ethiopian sensibilities you've brought to bear on Western traditions?

ESHETE: Tough question. I am not sure. One is I think, I remember *Ato Tekle Tsadiq Mekuria*, he is a distinguished historian, this was during the Derg period and I was teaching at Penn and he came to visit. And Philadelphia is supposed to be a historical city so I took him over to the place where the first congresses met and where the constitution was written, the Declaration of Independence was written. I showed him the Liberty Bell and so on. *Ato Tekle Tsadiq* looked at the Liberty Bell and asked, "how old is this"? and I told him and his reaction was well this is not history this is just a contemporary artifact. A sense of history is one that Ethiopians have. Take the oldest Ethiopian writing and take that of America and the latter is all yesterday you know. So one thing, I think, an Ethiopian brings to Western thinking is the depth and length of the past. Things like Aksum and so on are part of our personal self-image, not just national self-image. And so when we think of civilization, for example, we are not simply thinking of Ford. And that helps. And you see it in distinguished philosophers that are not from the West. It's not by accident, in my view, that Amartya Sen, distinguished economist-philosopher, focused on hunger, amongst others Ethiopian hunger and poverty, and that is what he won the Nobel Prize for, not for technical economics. And being Indian is not so different from being Ethiopian.

WOUBSHET: As you consider the riches of Ethiopian culture, where do you go to seek out a sensibility that speaks to you personally but also says something about the culture as a whole?

ESHETE: Certainly the church literature, of which I don't know nearly enough, but let me give you one example from a woman Ethiopian saint. It's a story that Ephraim Isaac likes to repeat and I love the story. She lived during the *Zemene Mesafint*, sometimes it is called the Era of the Princes, referring to an era when everybody was fighting everybody. She was deeply disturbed by the fact that her country was being destroyed, so she began praying, "Lord please bring peace to my country"—a great prayer, it is important. And

there are many like that. More modern ones, people like Mengistu Lemma, Eskundir Bogossian—people I know. I know both of them very well, great inspirations, and not least because they were Ethiopian to the core but also deeply influenced by cosmopolitan culture. After all, you were mentioning the things that influence us from the West, but clearly if you take the best and the most original in American culture, what is it?—it is African. It's jazz. It's blues. And it's writing, poetry, and other art forms that are influenced by jazz, blues, and so on. So even when we look to them it's not something alien to us, what inspires us, in the best of what they do.

WOUBSHET: One clear similarity I see between African American and Ethiopian cultures is the sacred-secular nexus, which is decisive in both. Can you say something about this relationship? I ask in part because I sense that in today's Ethiopia, people, especially young people, are becoming increasingly more rigid in and dogmatic about their religious beliefs.

ESHETE: If you think of the American case, America must be the most religious modern society by far. But one area where as you say the sacred-profane tie is fertile and ennobling, not demeaning, is the African America churches and African American culture at large. I am not religious, but I have always felt at home with African American churches whether it be Abyssinian church in New York, or right across the corner from where I lived in Philly there was an abolitionist church, the first abolitionist church, perfectly at home with the music, with everything, with the service, the enthusiasm, the community mindedness, the civic commitment that comes from these churches. What I find outrageous in terms of religion, and it has nothing to do with the sacred, is the political evangelists to whom we owe Bush. Now here too I think you will see much of the same—the sacred in Ethiopia as it figures for example in Yared's music or in Gebre Kristos's immortal crucifix painting is wonderful. Only an Ethiopian, I think, would have done that kind of thing—German expressionist but highly Ethiopian crucifix because in Ethiopia too we are somewhat like the other old religions like Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, in the sense that we don't glorify the image including the image of Christ and he has this cross without Christ, right? There is this.

At the same time you have now the so-called modern evangelist religious awakenings everywhere, in Islam, among the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, and among the Protestant churches. And a striking feature in all of them for me is how minimal the sacred is in these religious movements despite all the other paraphernalia and fanaticism. But I think there are two conceptions of secularism. One is the American one, which we have adopted critically in our constitution as the separation view, strict separation. The other view of the secular, Indians are drawn towards this although it hasn't worked very well for them either, is not the strict separation but creating a kind of an inter-faith kind of secular culture where there is an overlap of different religious values. This is something we had traditionally in Ethiopia in places like Wollo, in places like Harar or in Keren. You have this overlapping culture at least among Muslims and Orthodox Christians. That is what we should aim at, that kind of secularism, secularism which draws on the best of the religious values of all the great religions, and they have a lot in common and so there is no problem.

WOUBSHET: You have been a witness to the twentieth century and vast changes in human affairs in such a short span of time. In Ethiopia, you've seen, and participated in, two of the country's major changes. I was taken by your comment earlier that you didn't imagine that the emperor's regime would collapse, that his divine right to rule would end. Let me end, then, by asking you this: Do you have thoughts about the future? What kind of a century awaits us? What kind of regimes might come into being?

ESHETE: In the last of these changes, for example, everybody was convinced that socialism has hit the dust internationally and it's off the public agenda, we are all democrats now, we are all capitalists now. This wasn't too many years ago. Capitalism doesn't look so good now? Does it? And it doesn't look like it is such an enduring doctrine, right? Every Nobel Prize winner is being asked for a new conception of capitalism which I think is an admission of defeat. I haven't heard one person say an intelligent thing about the future of capitalism since this pathetic disaster. I say pathetic because there seems to be no good reason behind it except greed and stupid ideas like how to make a lot of money out of debt. So I am still a socialist and socialism still has a future for good reasons. I don't gloat at the failure of capitalism, but I do enjoy the idea that what is supposed to be the enduring according to our Western friends, the enduring social form, the only one that fits our best theoretical knowledge and our best views about evolution, is not working. So this gives hope—hope because of the things we were talking about before now that people are forced to think about new imaginative possibilities. We can't simply say that the business of rule, the business of conducting public life including each of our lives, is to polish and perfect capitalism. That can't be the case. So it may not be socialism, but we have to think of new possibilities. We know this one is not working and probably cannot be repaired—in my mind anyway.